

## BE FAITHFUL IN ADVERSITY - THE COURAGE TO ENDURE

Nehemiah 6:1-19

Is it more important to “begin well” or “end well?” We've all heard the expression, “All’s well that ends well.” I guess there is a lot of truth in that saying. We know of situations where little children start out in the first grade and they are all excited and eager to learn and somewhere along the way, they lose that enthusiasm and, by the time they reach high school, they are “drop outs.” There are other cases where a young person gets a slow start because of one reason or another but winds up finishing first in his or her class. Surely, it is important to “end well” or to be able to stick to the task until it is done. It seems that faithfulness and endurance are closely allied.

What causes one person to succeed and another to fail? If we knew the complete answer to that question, we could be very rich and famous for many people want to know the answer to that very question. We could name a few factors: drive, determination, faithfulness, and courage. All these are important. For most of us who live in this area which is relatively free of threats; drive and determination may be all that is needed to succeed. However, when there is an element of danger or threat, then courage will become the determining factor as to whether we faithfully finish the course.

The Bible puts a lot of emphasis on finishing well, of not turning back, of enduring to the end. Our society encourages people to “stick to it,” to “hang in there,” to “keep on keeping on.” All of us have seen the problems that come when someone “just gives up.” Many of the heroes of the faith were people of courage, people who had their goals in mind, had the will to reach the goal and went on despite the dangers and problems that threatened them. One of these heroes was Nehemiah. He had his goal (to rebuild the wall) and he certainly had the determination to do the job; however, because of the opposition of Israel’s enemies he would not have succeeded without the courage to faithfully endure.

### Responding to Dangerous Opposition – 6:1-4

<sup>1</sup>Now when it was reported to Sanballat, Tobiah, to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall, and *that* no breach remained in it, although at that time I had not set up the doors in the gates, <sup>2</sup>then Sanballat and Geshem sent *a message* to me, saying, “Come, let us meet together at Chephirim in the plain of Ono.” But they were planning to harm me. <sup>3</sup>So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?” <sup>4</sup>They sent *messages* to me four times in this manner, and I answered them in the same way. Nehemiah 6:1-4 (NASB95)

Did you ever notice how the same old opposition keeps coming up again and again? There are some people who you can just count on to be against everything. You've heard their choruses: That will never work, we tried that before, you can't do that, nobody does it that way. These guys had tried to stop the work on the wall as it was just beginning. They ridiculed and threatened and discouraged and because of Nehemiah’s faithfulness, drive, determination and courage, the work went on. They had made good progress and were to the point of putting up the doors in the gates.

The enemies were not about to give up. They were ready to do something drastic to stop the work. Their first scheme was an assassination plot. They said wanted to have what we might call a “summit meeting” where the leaders of Samaria and some of the other surrounding nations would meet with the leader of Israel. The real purpose was to get Nehemiah away from the protection of the Jews so that they could kill him. Nehemiah was perceptive enough to see through their plan and he refused to walk into their trap. Notice that he did not accuse them of

wrongdoing, but pointed out that what he was doing was so important that he could not take out time to go. Had he replied to the invitation with accusations of their intent, it would have invited argument. When Nehemiah used his own set of values and principles as the reason for not interrupting the work, then Sanballat had no point of argument. This is a good principle to follow when we encounter temptation. If we use the argument that we might get into trouble or that we might get caught, then Satan can counter argue that others have done the same thing and not been caught. However, if we argue that such action would be in conflict with our love for God, would disappoint God and hinder the fellowship that we have with Him, then Satan has no argument against that.

Just because we say “no” to temptation one time does not mean that it will go away. Nehemiah told these people “no” and they came back three more times. We have to continue to be faithful and not just resist one time and think that we have victory in the war because the enemy of our souls will not give up with just one try.

Persistence is a virtue that the forces of evil seem to have a better handle on than do most Christians. You can probably remember several years ago when there was a vote to see if we would allow liquor stores in the city of Kingsport. It was voted down time after time and yet the “wet” forces kept coming back time after time and finally they won. The same thing happened with liquor by the drink.

#### False Accusations – 6:5-7

<sup>5</sup>Then Sanballat sent his servant to me in the same manner a fifth time with an open letter in his hand. <sup>6</sup>In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Gashmu says, that you and the Jews are planning to rebel; therefore you are rebuilding the wall. And you are to be their king, according to these reports. <sup>7</sup>“You have also appointed prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, ‘A king is in Judah!’ And now it will be reported to the king according to these reports. So come now, let us take counsel together.” Nehemiah 6:5-7 (NASB95)

When the assassination plot failed, Sanballat was not about to give up in his determination to keep Jerusalem vulnerable. When his first trick didn't work, he decided to try a new one. This time it was slander. He sent an open letter (sort of like a letter to the editor) accusing Nehemiah of rebellion against the Persian Empire. These unsubstantiated lies were thinly veiled attempts to use extortion against Nehemiah with a threat of harsh retaliation from the king of Persia. This ploy was also designed to discourage the workers and perhaps turn the people against Nehemiah if they thought that the wrath of the king of Persia would come down on them.

They obviously had put a lot thought into this false intricate plot of what they were accusing Nehemiah of trying to do. They had taken the good intent of rebuilding the wall for protection against enemies and fabricated a completely false reason that the intent was to rebel against Persia. The lesson for us to learn is that we can have the best of intentions and there may be someone who will deliberately misinterpret our motives in an attempt to hinder the work of the kingdom of God.

On the pretense of wanting to meet with Nehemiah to put these rumors to rest, they were hoping to use this slander ploy to get them another chance to assassinate Nehemiah.

#### Responding to Lies – 6:8-9

<sup>8</sup>Then I sent a message to him saying, “Such things as you are saying have not been done, but you are inventing them in your own mind.” <sup>9</sup>For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking, “They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.” But now, *O God*, strengthen my hands. Nehemiah 6:8-9 (NASB95)

Nehemiah did not fall for this trick either. Nehemiah knew where he stood and that he was loyal to the king of Persia. In fact, he was operating under the direction of the king and that

gave him confidence even in the face of the lie that Sanballat and his friends were telling. Nehemiah recognized that Sanballat was trying to interject discord among the workers that were tired and on the verge of being discouraged. The reality of the weariness of the workers and the fact that fatigue can lead to discouragement was on Nehemiah's mind and he knew that he needed help from God to counteract this problem. Nehemiah prayed a simple prayer for God to strengthen him for the job that he had to do. Each of us, first of all, needs to realize that we do need help in getting accomplished all that we should do. Sometimes we just ignore what we ought to do. But even after we come to a realization that we have much work to do – the fields are white unto harvest – the next critical point is for us to realize that we must have God's help to do God's work.

### Responding to Bad Advice – 6:10-14

<sup>10</sup> When I entered the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined at home, he said, "Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple, and let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you, and they are coming to kill you at night."<sup>11</sup> But I said, "Should a man like me flee? And could one such as I go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in."<sup>12</sup> Then I perceived that surely God had not sent him, but he uttered *his* prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.<sup>13</sup> He was hired for this reason, that I might become frightened and act accordingly and sin, so that they might have an evil report in order that they could reproach me.<sup>14</sup> Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were *trying* to frighten me. Nehemiah 6:10-14 (NASB95)

The third plan that Tobiah and Sanballat initiated has been described as treachery. Apparently, Tobiah had enlisted the help of a Jew named Shemaiah who was a priest and recognized by some of the Jews as being a prophet of sorts. This priest pretended to want to help Nehemiah by telling him of an impending plot to kill him that very night. He then offered a plan of protection to prevent that from happening. The plan was for Shemaiah to take Nehemiah into the temple sanctuary and lock the doors so that the assassins could not get to him.

On the surface that might sound like a good plan from someone who had Nehemiah's best interest at heart. However, the plan was full of flaws. Since Nehemiah was not ignorant of the Law, he immediately discerned the treachery that was happening. Notice that Nehemiah did not accuse Shemaiah of working with the enemies of God and committing treason against his governor. When such accusations are made, defenses immediately go up by those who are accused and little more is learned.

Nehemiah's approach was to be calm, cool, and collected. He simply used logic and truth to sidestep the trap they were setting for him. His first question was related to what people should expect from those in leadership positions. He was the governor! Should the leader of the people run away when a threat is made or should he stand his ground having confidence in God to protect him? Leaders are expected to be out in front – not leading from behind. That is the logic part of Nehemiah's argument against Shemaiah's pitiful plan.

The "truth" part of Nehemiah's reason for not doing what was suggested was the fact that he was not permitted under the law to go into the sanctuary of the temple since he was not a priest. If he had done so, then he would have essentially destroyed his credibility to be a leader of the people. A person who is sworn to uphold the law and then deliberately disregards or violates the law is not fit to be a leader. There is no argument or spin that he could have come up with that would have repaired the damage such a move would have created.

God gave Nehemiah the discernment he needed to avoid doing something that could have made him ineffective as governor of Judah. Because discernment was not proof, Nehemiah did not take legal action in the civil courts of Judah against Shemaiah, but he did take the matter

before God who sits in judgment against all that is wrong. He prayed a simple prayer for God to remember those who were plotting against him because he was doing the work God had called him to do.

### Recognizing Internal Threats – 6:15-19

<sup>15</sup> So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of *the month* Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> When all our enemies heard *of it*, and all the nations surrounding us saw *it*, they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. <sup>17</sup> Also in those days many letters went from the nobles of Judah to Tobiah, and Tobiah's *letters* came to them. <sup>18</sup> For many in Judah were bound by oath to him because he was the son-in-law of Shecaniah the son of Arah, and his son Jehohanan had married the daughter of Meshullam the son of Berechiah. <sup>19</sup> Moreover, they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him. Then Tobiah sent letters to frighten me. Nehemiah 6:15-19 (NASB95)

Sometimes the reward for faithfulness is seeing what you have worked on come to fruition. In just 52 days, what had appeared to be an impossible job was finished. The people had a vision of what they wanted to accomplish, they had the drive and determination to do the work and finally they had the courage to carry on in spite of the threats that were directed toward them.

The job that they accomplished was so impressive that even their enemies were amazed and very concerned because they interpreted the events as something that was carried out by the God of the Jews. We must live our lives in such a way so that others will recognize the presence of God in our lives.

A word of caution is needed especially when we have just experienced a victory. We may tend to let down our defenses after having success and that simply gives the enemy (who does not give up) a chance for another attack. The resistance to what God was doing in Judah in the days of Nehemiah still continued and it turned to internal intrigue. Since attempts to assassinate Nehemiah had failed, slander had failed, and treachery did not work, the enemy simply took a more subtle approach. People who were "Jews in name only" were collaborating with the outside enemies of what God was doing.

What is the lesson for us in our day and time? We need to be very careful about putting people who have other loyalties into positions of influence and power. Some of the officials in the government of Judah had bound themselves by oaths to those outside of Judah because of family ties as a result of intermarriages with non-Jews. We need to be very careful to determine the backgrounds and loyalties of people we elect to positions of power in the government and even those whom we might call to be pastors of churches. Why? Because there will be adversities and resistance and only those who have undivided loyalties can be counted on to be faithful and have the courage to endure to the end.